

# Video fantasies and visual poetry

By Christine Temin  
GLOBE STAFF

The arrival from Japan of the first portable video cameras, in the mid-1960s, spawned an artistic revolution that piggy-backed on the revolution in the society at large. It was the

Woodstock era. Artists took those cameras to the streets. A periodical called *Radical Software* appeared, a combination manifesto and how-to. Soon, artists believed, video art would show up on everybody's TV, every night, sandwiched between commercials. Video would be the art of the masses.

It didn't happen, for reasons political, financial, and logistical. Video has become a major art form in the last 30 years, but mostly it's stayed in galleries and museums. It has, however, escaped the confining flatness of the square monitor, expanding into three dimensions.

A large chunk of the story of how that happened is currently at the Massachusetts College of Art, in a stellar show called "Transmission." It was organized by the school's director of communications, Michele Furst, a former director of the Boston Film/Video Foundation; and Susan Dowling, who was executive director of the New Television Workshop, a trailblazing lab at WGBH-TV in Boston from the late 1960s until its demise in 1993.

Video's history is largely untold, due to factors from poor archives to the difficulty of exhibiting technologically demanding work. One room-size installation at Mass. Art has a backstage area almost as big, filled with a maze of wires. Bravo to Furst and Dowling for bravely forging ahead with the show, which looks at then and now, with early and recent works by such major artists as Nam June Paik, William Wegman, and Beryl Korot, and a focus on Boston as a hotbed of video in its formative years and, to a lesser extent, later on. Paik built the first video synthesizer, in 1969-70, at WGBH. Tony

Oursler, a major voice, taught video at Mass. Art from 1988 to 1995.

The show raises important questions: about artists acknowledging engineers as collaborators, as they would with master printers; about collecting video, such a difficult enterprise that few museums and fewer private collectors have ventured into it.

Anyone old enough to remember the late '60s and '70s will experience acute *deja vu* while watching tapes of Paik playing the piano with his head and John Cage famously *not* playing the grand piano hauled into the middle of Harvard Square for his piece consisting of 2½ minutes of silence. As for Wegman, Mass. Art's star alumnus was even funnier in the simple sagas of the early '70s than in his current, more elaborate fantasies. Face smeared with shaving cream, he looks into the camera dolefully and says, "I was born with no mouth at all. When my grandfather died, when I was 6, they transplanted his mouth onto me. So I've been shaving since I was 6."

Peter Campus goes Surrealism one better, peeling off his own face. Marta Renzi bounces off cars; Dawn Kramer bounces off the walls of a Mass. Art classroom. Remy Charlip peers down on a bed where a woman stretches to Saint-Saens's "The Swan." Bill Viola tapes people sitting in their living rooms, watching TV, icons of passivity. These are great period moments.

But there is more to this show than sitting in front of a monitor wearing headphones. Among its enticements are two major sculptures built around the shape of an egg. Paik's 1984-89 "Egg Grows" starts with a real egg and continues with a parade of eight monitors - upright, tilting, and ultimately in a tower of three, with an ever-larger image of an egg in each. Nothing happens. Paik has perversely used a medium about motion to create stasis instead.

Across the gallery is Oursler's grid of 25 larger-than-life egg-heads installed in a niche in the wall, with his face projected on each. While most of his muttering is unintel-

ligible, if clearly disgruntled, an occasional line comes through. "Stay out of my mind" is one - more evidence of Oursler's ongoing commitment to paranoid psychodrama.

The star of this show is Beryl Korot, a video pioneer, painter, and frequent visitor to BF/VF in the '70s, here represented by two major works: the 1977 "Text and Commentary," so complex to set up that, although it was acclaimed at its debut, it hasn't been shown since 1980; and the 1998 "Hindenburg," the first of a planned operatic trilogy in collaboration with composer Steve Reich.

Five intricate earth-toned weavings hang at the heart of "Text and Commentary." Five monitors show Korot doing the actual weaving, her hands knotting the threads, bare feet pushing the treadle. Five obsessive diagram-drawings hang on a wall, maps of the patterns of the finished textiles. On another wall is a pictographic score, showing what was done in the weaving process. You have the feeling that, were the actual weavings to disappear, it would be possible to recreate them through the exhaustive and exquisite records Korot has supplied.

The entire, hanger-size Huntington Gallery is devoted to "Hindenburg." At one end of the space is a screen, 25 feet wide. Across the vast void are a couple of benches and chairs. You feel overwhelmed by this ocean of space even before the action starts. When it does, it's riveting. A towering Paul von Hindenburg marches across the screen, himself a blimp shape, like the ill-fated German airship named for him. Using historic film footage, stills, newspaper records, computer-generated images, and the unrelenting pulse of Reich's score, Korot creates a frenetic collage in which the burning of the dirigible becomes a dark augury of Hitler's rise. "Hindenburg" is video at its most majestic - and most mature, a medium come of age.

► "TRANSMISSION" - at Massachusetts College of Art's Bakalar and Huntington Galleries, through Feb. 27. Saturday from